

## COMMUNITY ORGANIZING PROJECTS ARE STRENGTHENED BY INTERNAL ACCOUNTABILITY-CONFRONTATION\*

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Community organizers know from experience the tactics of power-oriented confrontation to hold government and corporate decision-makers accountable. We have a tradition of building power and using it to bring about changes in their policies, appropriations, and operations. Grassroots organizers and leaders are trained and experienced in such tactics as a matter of course. We're familiar with a variety of accountability-action scenarios, from a delegation of a half-dozen members to an assembly of thousands, confronting decision-makers for the sake of accountability.

But *within our own organizations*, how do we hold individuals accountable for their commitments and responsibilities? The question isn't academic because the absence of internal accountability has far-reaching effects. The worst of those effects get produced by outliers who have no legitimate role in our organizations. Despite the positive possibilities for holding our leaders, members and staff accountable, which we'll consider momentarily, one of the certainties in building organizations and participating in them is that occasionally we encounter individuals who are hell-bent on playing destructive roles, typically for covert, self-interested motives. By concealing their intentions, they multiply their power and bamboozle other members of the organization, making it hard to identify and disempower them.

An effective guardrail against such individuals is a *culture of accountability* that "outs" persistent free-loaders who rip off the assets of the organization for personal benefit and invariably fail to make any contributions; despoilers, who join action teams and committees for "unhealthy" reasons, consistently shunning all useful participation and, instead, adding a misdirected propensity to every activity; and cool alternators, who are two-faced, repeatedly affecting loyalty to the organization when acting within it but coolly betraying its interests elsewhere. Organization culture, policy and practice should openly confront and, when necessary, fully expose individuals who are not simply making mistakes but knowingly, even purposefully, impairing the mission of the organization, giving them no room to promote their sub rosa agendas, un-

dermining any influence they may have within the organization.

Thankfully, in my experience of faith-based and neighborhood-based community organizing (CO), although I've seen many individuals whose behavior had damaging effects, they apparently were not knowingly subverting the mission of their organization. Yet their actions reduced organizational mileage, and they were not held accountable. Sometimes their behavior was shined-on because they had taken on jobs no one else wanted to do, so they were allowed to continue creating confusion, misdirection, and loss. Sometimes, because of their obvious emotional and/or psychological baggage, their behavior was rationalized by others with ambivalent sympathy. Sometimes their bad behavior was tolerated with anxious resignation because the power of their personality was intimidating.

The effects of these failures of accountability stand out to anyone who pays attention. They often contribute to staff and leader "burnout," which can be a euphemism for the repudiation of organizational culture that tolerates unrelenting bad behavior. The worst effect is that some of the best staff and leaders decide they can be more useful elsewhere. The failure of accountability can also have the unintended effect of reinforcing and multiplying bad behavior bit-by-bit until it threatens the life of the organization. Ultimately, our ability to hold other power-players accountable in the CO action field relies on learning to hold everyone accountable in our own organizations.

Every organization is eventually compelled to adopt methods of internal accountability or to accept a downward spiral of its human and financial resources. When a death-spiral follows from identifiable mistakes or neglect, it's necessary to hold the responsible individuals accountable for their problematic planning or lack of it, action or inaction, and relationships or the lack of them; and, when failing to adequately account for themselves, that they be subject to appropriate consequences, which should be aimed not to punish them but to improve their performance.

Neighborhood- and faith-based organizing projects often seek to ensure accountability of their

members in actions and campaigns using a well-known method: In open meetings, they call for and record “collectible commitments.” Individuals are asked to make specific commitments, to be fulfilled by set times. When the times have passed, they are asked, again in open meetings, to report whether they have fulfilled their commitments.

But much of the failure of accountability in organizations can’t be remedied by calling for it in formal meetings. Often it must be achieved by on-the-fly leadership in response to unexpected situations and opportunities. Accordingly, it’s useful to consider how many of our organization’s leaders, formal and informal, are sufficiently trained and experienced to *constructively* confront others and hold them accountable (the particulars of which we’ll return to momentarily). It’s common in many organizations that leaders are *not* trained and skilled to constructively hold others accountable. They are neither experienced nor intellectually or emotionally prepared for accountability-confrontation.

How many leaders does an organization need to ensure accountability throughout its ranks? Certainly, the answer is that more is always better—we can never have too many. Ideally, we want everyone to assume accountability-leadership when it’s called for. Instead of relying on a small number of formal leaders to ensure accountability, we can develop a culture of accountability in which modeling of the method works as a kind of educative wallpaper that unmistakably conveys the obligations of participation in the organization.

Yet for many of us, the thought of confrontation raises our fear of hostility, anger, and threats, which we want to avoid at all costs, and thus these emotions become obstacles to accountability-confrontation. We may think we’re the only ones who are intimidated and immobilized by the prospect of confrontation, but the most seemingly unlikely people have such reactions. In 1965, I was invited to attend the Annual Presidential Prayer Breakfast in Washington, D.C. After the breakfast, a couple of hundred student body presidents met with a panel of a half-dozen congressmen, who were up on a dais at the front of the room. For about 20 minutes, the congressmen looked down on us and smothered us in a non-stop Christian fundamentalist diatribe that was critical of mid-1960s student life and American society. My blood was boiling, but the room was as silent as a tomb—no one whispered a word in opposition to what was going on. Finally, sitting near the back of the room, I raised my hand, stood up, and openly protested. I said that I was Jewish, that some of my fellow student body presidents were Muslim or mainline Christians (Catholics, Methodists, Presbyterians, etc.), and I didn’t appreciate being propagandized by Christian fundamentalists as part of what was billed as a non-denominational prayer breakfast. At that point, the silence was broken by enthusiastic applause. After the meeting was over, several of the student body presidents thanked me for speaking up. What these events revealed was that university student

body presidents, the students we would imagine to be the most outgoing and least intimidated by the prospect of speaking up to hold someone accountable in that era, were intimidated and immobilized in a situation they felt was outrageous. The lesson for me was that fear and anxiety about confrontation is widespread.

This is as true today as it was more than 50 years ago. Recently, while waiting for my appointment at a Kaiser Permanente optometry department, I found myself sitting across from a man who was not masked, although there were prominent signs stating that masks were required throughout the facility. Obviously, none of the many staff members who had seen him had raised the issue. Trying not to sound unkind or critical, I asked why he wasn’t wearing a mask. He said that he thought they were no longer required. I said that the requirement was still in force and he apologized and immediately put on a mask. A moment later, a staff member who was sitting one seat away from him, who had failed to raise the issue, belatedly chimed in to confirm that the requirement was still in force. Repeatedly, in a variety of settings in which masks were required, I’ve seen staff ignore maskless patrons and patients rather than risk a confrontation.

Once we look head-on at the lack internal accountability, it becomes obvious that few members of our organizations are willing to confront and hold accountable others who fail to live up to their obligations and commitments, and the outcomes are predictable. They include missing fundraising and budget deadlines, neglecting opportunities to deal with chronic recruiting problems, and bungling leadership development initiatives. The individuals responsible for these failures often endure embarrassment and ridicule from others, a loss of self-respect, self-worth, and self-esteem, and a cratering of self-confidence, which may further degrade their performance. But they are rarely held accountable to ensure that their performance improves, nor are they denied opportunities to continue their problematic decisions and actions.

Some people seem to believe that only a small number of individuals have the capacity to confront and hold others accountable? They claim to personally know such people. Students and organization members and leaders have said they see me that way, despite my history. Back in the early 1970s I was the drug abuse coordinator for L.A. County. I had been working to strengthen community-based treatment programs and was openly critical of the Board of Supervisors for failing to allocate funds for them. Finally, my chance came to meet privately with the Chairman of the Board when he summoned me to his office on the top floor of the County Hall of Administration. I thought it would be an opportunity to tell him what I thought the Board should do and why—in effect, to hold him accountable for the failure of the Board to support community-based programs. What happened was that I found myself standing in front of his mammoth desk with my teeth chattering and my knees shaking so badly that I could barely speak, while he read me the

riot act for publicly criticizing the Board.

We're not born fearless of confrontation and holding others accountable. But professional maturity demands that we *learn to overcome our fears*. If we don't get beyond our fears, we never become competent as professionals. And our organizations are always stunted in their achievements because of our fear-driven incompetence.

Sometimes we immobilize ourselves because of early conditioning or a traumatic event in our learning history. Many years ago I knew a widely admired rabbi who had shown that he was fearful of confrontation. I had observed him working with members and leaders of his congregation. Repeatedly, he allowed serious problems to fester and become destructive. One evening when we were alone in his office, I asked him why he never confronted people to hold them accountable. He said that when he was a boy, he saw his father in a confrontation lose control of his bowels and soil himself. He feared that he too might similarly lose control.

Sometimes we immobilize ourselves by rationalizing our fear, telling ourselves that confronting the individual in question won't do any good. I learned a lesson about such self-defeating mind games many decades ago when working as a project director for a national public administration consulting company. We had a \$250 thousand dollar contract with the New York State Department of Mental Hygiene. The contract would be worth a couple of million in today's dollars. We had completed half of the contract and had collected \$125 thousand in fees. The Commissioner of Mental Hygiene called us to a meeting at the New York State capitol. A half-dozen of us sat down around the conference table in the Commissioner's office—my boss, who was the president of our company, the Commissioner, several of his aides, and me. With only a few preliminary remarks, the Commissioner announced that, although we had done a good job, his department was facing a budget crisis, and the Department of Mental Hygiene was canceling the remainder of our contract. We would lose \$125 thousand in fees. My first thoughts were self-centered: "that's it—I'm out of a job as project director" and then, "there's nothing we can do about this—it's a done deal." My boss never skipped a beat. Not hesitating more than a few seconds, he began to confront the Commissioner, eye-to-eye, holding him accountable for "*fairness*." I was in awe of what he was doing. He looked into the Commissioner's eyes and asked whether he thought it was fair that many of our company's employees would be laid off, lose their incomes and be unable to support their families if the contract was canceled. He asked whether the Commissioner thought it was fair to cancel the contract when our employees had done such excellent work for his department. By confronting the Commissioner and holding him accountable to a standard of fairness, against all odds, my boss saved the contract and the jobs of our staff.

Most significantly, individuals may be intimidated

by the thought of confrontation because they have not been taught how to confront someone *constructively*. And the inability of CO members, leaders and staff to deal constructively with confrontation may continue unacknowledged for long periods of time. Thus, role-play training in this essential capability ought to be a regular feature of any organization's development plan. But organizational capacity to deal constructively with internal confrontation also requires creating a culture of accountability. Two of the basic elements of that culture include:

*Recognition that mistakes are inevitable but repeating them is not:* The culture of many organizations reverses what should be our understanding about mistakes. Less-than-ideal culture unwittingly reinforces hiding or denying mistakes and then, because their causes and correctives were never addressed, endlessly repeating them, often below the radar of ordinary organizational life. A more useful approach positively sanctions the practice of openly acknowledging that mistakes are inevitable. Then, by bringing them into the open for analysis, it's possible to generate policies, practices, and training to deal with similar situations in the future.

*Recognition that professional practice can't afford the luxury of disabling guilt and embarrassment for mistakes:* It's essential to overcome the inclination to indulge those emotions. Misplaced, they often reflect mistaken attitudes, mostly experienced by newcomers to professional CO, and they become obstacles to dealing openly with mistakes. Even when poor performance is caused by irresponsibility, negligence, and ethical or moral lapses, guilt and embarrassment per se are not helpful. The culture of the organization should reinforce the understanding that indulging those emotions is unproductive, a waste of time, energy, and spirit. The focus instead should be on learning the causes of poor performance and doing whatever is necessary to overcome the related challenges.

Not surprisingly, covert resistance to developing accountability-culture can sabotage the process. The fear of being personally held accountable, especially in the presence of others, can be intimidating. It anticipates the prospect of being publicly embarrassed, humiliated, or even shamed. An antidote to accountability-culture resistance is open discussion among members, leaders and staff, concentrating on the *benefits* of being constructively confronted and held accountable by our peers and colleagues, including: discovering that we're not alone in making mistakes; receiving support to deal with situations that ordinarily have been sources of frustration and failure for us; recognizing that it's the best way to avoid repeating mistakes; gaining know-how that will be useful to us professionally and personally; and becoming more productive and more valued by our co-workers and colleagues.

But for many, openness to participating in a culture of constructive confrontation requires a degree of self-transformation. In effect, it demands dedication to improving our work for the benefit of the common-

weal, and it requires allowing others to pull our covers and reveal our shortcomings. The irony is that in most circumstances, openly admitting ordinary foibles and failures—like, “We lost an opportunity for a grant because I missed the deadline” or “One of our best trainee organizers left because I came on to her”—may produce in fellow organizers and leaders a flash of self-recognition and understanding.

What’s required to hold someone accountable constructively? First, it calls for *leadership*, although not necessarily by occupying a formal leadership role or position. Leadership in such situations can be especially helpful when it takes three essential steps, which are aimed to model leadership for the person being held accountable and which focus not on failure but the wherewithal to succeed:

*The support step* offers backing at the outset by posing a confrontation-challenge that uses specific supportive language, such as: “I know that one-to-ones can be difficult, and I want you to know that many of us want to help you.” Constructive support addresses what people most often fear when pushed to perform, which includes failure, burdensome demands, and unending commitment. We make it more likely they’ll take a risk by offering help that speaks to their practical, emotional, psychological, and moral-spiritual needs for reassurance. Offers of support should clearly communicate the specific resources that are made available. However, the most effective expression of support is that we personally have their backs.

*The challenge step* poses objectives that are gauged to the resources and experience of the individuals being held accountable—their experience, skills, emotional wherewithal, learning style, etc.—which we assess before making challenges. We want to resist the temptation to talk people into doing what we want them to do, so we make the challenge in the form of a question, such as, “Would you be willing to \_\_\_\_?”—after which we stop talking and wait for the answer. We want to propose challenges with a neutral tone of voice, which allows the person to accept or refuse the challenge without a loss of dignity. But we don’t take refusals as final, recognizing that circumstances change and that it’s appropriate and necessary to pose additional challenges. The alternatives to this approach include steamrolling, manipulating, bamboozling, and shaming people into doing what we want them to do. But those methods tend not to produce the kind of participation we want.

*The accountability-mentoring step* is initiated when time has passed and it’s clear that a confronta-

tion-accountability challenge has either been met or not met. It requires that we budget sufficient staff resources so that follow-up to challenges doesn’t fall through the cracks. When the individual has failed to meet the challenge, it’s important that we credit any commitment and effort, and that we help the person understand what happened and what it means. We avoid causing embarrassment by focusing on what resources the person would want to have for a similar challenge in the future. Then we pose another challenge, which offers an opportunity to reattempt the task and succeed. When an individual has successfully met a challenge, we credit the accomplishment and pose another challenge that builds on the confidence and skill acquired from meeting the first challenge.

If the person we want to hold accountable doesn’t respond to a confrontation-accountability challenge, it’s best to avoid ungrounded assumptions. Before we jump to conclusions, it’s worthwhile to determine in fact why the individual failed. There are several unremarkable possibilities that should not be overlooked: It may simply be a matter of insufficient know-how because we failed to provide the necessary training; unknown to us, confrontation may be an emotionally punishing experience for the person, the contemplation of which produces disabling anxiety; fulfilling the challenge may have been displaced by a more important or rewarding activity, like attending an unexpected family funeral; practical obstacles may have arisen to prevent performance, such as a car breakdown or sudden illness; or given a known lackadaisical culture of the organization, it may have appeared that there wouldn’t be any consequences for not fulfilling the challenge.

Obviously, the best way to learn why an individual failed to meet an accountability-confrontation challenge is face-to-face talk. What should be our attitude and tone of voice when we confront someone for the sake of accountability? We should have in mind as staff and leaders, the possibility that we may have failed the individual as much or more than he or she has failed the organization. We should never embarrass, humiliate or shame the person, but instead begin a process that will result in a more competent and confident contributor to the organization. Whatever the failure or the reason for it, we want to promote the cultural standard of treating everyone with kindness and respect but nevertheless hold one and all accountable for organizationally problematic decisions and actions.

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